DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 210 917 FL 012 694

AUTHOR Bassano, Sharron Kay; Christison, Mary Ann
TITLE Developing Successful Conversation Groups in the Intermediate and Advanced ESL Classroom.
INSTITUTION California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 14p.; In its CATESOL Occasional Papers, Number 7, p1-13, 1981. Paper presented at the TESOL Convention (Detroit, MI, 1981) and at the CATESOL Conference (Monterey, CA, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; College Second Language Programs; *Communicative Competence (Languages); *Conversational Language Courses; Course Content; *English (Second Language); *Group Behavior; Group Unity; Higher Education; Instructional Design; Interaction Process Analysis; *Language Attitudes; Language Fluency; Large Group Instruction; Self Concept; Small Group Instruction; Student Attitudes; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Suggestions for improving conversation groups in the intermediate and advanced English as a second language classroom are considered with attention directed to design of the activities, preparation of the individuals involved, and selection of the subject matter. In addition, factors that cause conversation groups to fail are discussed. A progressive format or sequencing of strategies in the conversation class, along with functional interaction techniques that promote "free" conversation, are advocated. The following six activity categories are described, and objectives and examples of activities are identified: restructuring, one-centered, unified group, dyads, small group, and large group. It seems to be a good idea to start with restructuring, unified group, and one-centered activities, as these types begin to change the students' attitudes about what learning entails, about their own self-image, and about the importance of cooperation in forming a positive class experience. All interpersonal activities should move gradually from low-risk, nonpersonal content, such as games, information gathering, reporting, problem-solving, to activities that ask for the sharing of personal values, beliefs, and feelings. (Author/SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED210917

California Association
Teachers of English to
Speakers of Other Languages

CATESOL Occasional Papers
Number 7 (Fall, 1981)

DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL CONVERSATION GROUPS IN THE INTERMEDIATE AND ADVANCED ESL CLASSROOM

Sharron Kay Bassano
Santa Cruz Adult School

and

Mary Ann Christison
Snow College, Utah

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Building a classroom atmosphere where students can and do learn to express themselves freely and sincerely in self-directed groups requires careful planning in three areas: 1.) Design of the activities, 2.) Preparation of the individuals involved, and 3.) Selection of the subject matter. This paper offers some insights into what causes conversation groups to fail, and shares a simple, logical approach to preparing teachers and students for the "free" conversation experience that succeeds. A specific strategy context is described and sample activities are detailed within each strategy type.

Ask any student of English as a Second Language what it is that s/he wants most from the language class experience and nine times out of ten the answer will be, "More conversation

---

This paper was presented at TESOL '81 in Detroit by both Mary Ann and Sharron, and then again at CATESOL '81 in Monterey by Sharron.

Ms. Bassano teaches ESL and Values Clarification and Spanish at Santa Cruz Adult School. She has published articles in the TESOL Newsletter and the CATESOL Occasional Papers and is the author of "Sounds Easy" phonics workbooks for adult ESL (Alemany Press, 1980). She has presented many times for TESOL and CATESOL and has a degree in Immigrant Education from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

FL 012 694

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY CATESOL

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

practice." We have thought about this request frequently and have wondered just what our students mean. If students are living and studying in the United States, don't they have plenty of opportunity to practice their English? Isn't the free conversation experience waiting for them daily just out of the classroom door?

We believe that students are, in fact, asking for more opportunity to become themselves in the new language. They want to become enthusiastically and authentically involved. They want to know that they are genuinely respected and to be treated as individuals by their teachers and classmates. It is so easy for our classes to become mechanistic and dull for the students. It is certainly easier to provide rote drills and endless pattern practice for them than it is to devise meaningful communication. We may be giving them ample opportunities to manipulate their new language, but too little time to become truly involved.

Outside of class, our students may have the chance to interact with the clerk in the market, the postmaster, or the bus driver, but personal communication is often only available with friends from the same native language background. Many times real conversation with native speakers of English is severely limited.

Being aware of the kind of communication students traditionally receive both in and out of the classroom, we have often experimented with free conversation sessions. Sometimes we succeed, and we are able to touch our students in just the right spot so they "take off." Sometimes we don't succeed at all and the conversations fall flat. For example, many times we put our students in a circle, give them a topic for discussion that we think is particularly stimulating, and then see them just sit and look at one another in an embarrassing silence, constrained, nervous, tense. We thus end up bailing out the group and carrying the bulk of the dialog ourselves. Often, too, there is one aggressive student who seems to feel a need to be center of attention at all times, a student who shows little awareness of functional group interaction patterns, and even less self discipline. Other times we have one or two students

---

Ms. Christison teaches ESL and directs the English Training Center at Snow College in Utah. She has published in DDLS Proceedings, the Utah Language Quarterly, and the TESOL Quarterly. She has presented papers at NAFSA, 1-TESOL, the 1979 and 1980 TESOL summer meeting and at the 1980 and 1981 TESOL Conventions. Mary Ann is past president of 1-TESOL.

who are either too shy to participate or who have such low self-esteem that they feel they have nothing of interest to offer the group. Each wonders "What do I have to contribute? Who could possibly be interested in what I have to say?"

Another very real problem is that many of our foreign students come to us from an academic background that is typified by straight rows of desks, all eyes to the front on the teacher who is directing each classroom activity like a conductor leading an orchestra. Often, they have had no experience in directing their own classroom use of language, and consequently they fall apart when left to their own devices. Many subconsciously assume that learning itself is not possible without the teacher present.

We have come to believe that when conversation groups fail, it is neither the fault of the activities presented, nor due to the lack of creativity or energy expended on the part of the teacher. We do spend hours conscientiously developing and designing activities and topics to cue exciting and effective conversation among students. Rather, the problem lies with unrealistic expectations. We put a room full of strangers into a circle, and we expect them to act as close friends before they even know or trust each other. We expect them to be well versed in the dynamics of group process such as turn taking, interrupting, active listening, etc. We expect them to know how to deal with the more vocal members and draw out the more timid or self-conscious ones. They are expected to know how to conduct themselves as a cohesive entity with no previous experience at self-direction in the classroom. Too often we give them topics that are too hot to handle -- topics that require a great deal of personal disclosure.

What we propose as a solution to these problems is a progressive format or sequencing of strategies in the conversation class which carefully prepares students, that systematically breaks down student stereotypes of classroom procedure, and that allows them to begin interacting democratically and independently. Through this approach, students learn step-by-step, functional interaction techniques at the same time group spirit or trust is being built. By careful sequencing of strategies, plenty of attention can be given to the boisterous students in an acceptable manner, and the quiet, retiring ones can be drawn painlessly into the action. All interpersonal activities should move gradually from low-risk, non-personal content, such as games, information gathering, reporting, problem solving, etc., to activities which ask for the sharing of personal values, beliefs, and feelings.

Through classroom experimentation, we have identified and

worked with six activity categories or strategies*: A.) restructuring, B.) one-centered, C.) unified group, D.) dyads, E.) small group, and F.) large group. Each one of the hundred or so activities we introduce to our conversation classes fits into one of these strategies. The objectives and formats are as follows:

STRATEGY: Restructuring

OBJECTIVES:
1. To break down expected classroom structures.
2. To create opportunities for supportive behavior.
3. To dispel fears and anxieties.
4. To relax both the student and the teacher.

Restructuring activities usually require the students to get up and out of their chairs, to interact physically as a group. There is minimal participation by the teacher. Often the communication is done non-verbally, through action, drawings, or quick written statements, and is usually non-personal.

STRATEGY: One-Centered

OBJECTIVES:
1. To provide each student with individual attention and acceptance from the entire group.
2. To increase the likelihood of contributions in the discussions which will follow later.

One-centered activities always put one student in the spotlight for a short time on a voluntary basis. Content can be either personal or non-personal and, depending on the student's self-confidence, may entail maximum or minimum verbalization; s/he can speak either from the front of the class or from his or her seat.

---

*The six strategies were originally developed for a workshop entitled "A Structural Approach to the Conversation Class" for TESOL '80 in San Francisco, presented by Karl J. Krahnke, Mary Ann Christison, and Thomas Schroeder.

STRATEGY: Unified Group

OBJECTIVES:
1. To develop cooperation among group members.
2. To emphasize each group member's value to the group.
3. To provide opportunities for group success.

Unified group activities require the participation of each group member. No one may bow out. Each person's contribution is essential to completion of the activity. The teacher is only minimally engaged in the activity, and content may be both personal or non-personal.

STRATEGY: Dyads

OBJECTIVES:
1. To get students accustomed to dealing openly with their own feelings, sensitivities, and emotions.
2. To provide opportunity for simple interaction with only one other class member at a time.
3. To develop sincere interpersonal communication in the second language.

Paired activities include both personal and non-personal content. Time is usually given to gather thoughts individually before sharing with the partner. Often these activities are followed up with a short written assignment or journal entries.

STRATEGY: Small Group

OBJECTIVES:
1. To develop in each individual a growing sense of commitment to the group.
2. To develop trust and cooperation among group members.
3. To develop group interaction techniques that facilitate fair interaction.

Group activities require patience and good listening patterns. They require attention sharing, turn-taking, fair interruptions. The teacher is usually facilitator and participator.

STRATEGY: Large Group

OBJECTIVES: The objectives for large groups are the same as for small groups. The only difference is the inclusion of a wider range of individuals whom the student has learned to trust.

We include here 12 sample activities, two for each strategy, to illustrate how the objectives are met. As you read them, consider what activities you personally have done in your conversation classes that might fit into each category or strategy.

1.

Strategy Type: Restructuring

Title: Every Body Votes

Hang large newsprint around the room, each sheet having as a heading a conversation topic -- "Politics," "Religion," "Family," "Fun and Recreation," "Work," "Love and Romance," "Friendship," etc. Ask students to consider what their personal favorite conversation topic is, and to signify their choice by going over and standing by the chart. After all have noticed the balance of interests, ask them to move and go stand by the chart that is their least favorite topic of conversation. After all have gotten a feeling for who is in the class and what some of their interests might be, give them all colored pens and ask them to mill about the room considering each chart and ask them to write some "graffiti" -- a comment, a statement, or a question they might have regarding each topic. Let this activity continue until all have had a chance to write something and to read what others have written.

To process or complete this restructuring activity, you might ask the group as a whole how they felt doing this exercise, what they noticed, what they heard. Or they might sit down in small groups and comment on what they were compelled to write or on something they read that they didn't agree with.

2.

Strategy Type: Restructuring

Title: Introductions

Give each student a piece of colored paper (12 x 18) and

some colored pens. Ask them to do the following:

Make a picture of yourself that shows us how you feel today, something you have, something you like to do, something you need or want. Under the picture, write three words that end with -ing that tell us three things you do very well. Over the picture write your first name.

Allow five or six minutes for this activity, then have the students pin the drawing to the front of their shirts and have them mill about SILENTLY for a few minutes. Ask them to get acquainted -- to learn a little bit about each other using only their eyes. After they have done this, ask them to stop where they are and think about these questions:

Did you see anything similar to your drawing?

Did you see something very different from your drawing?

What did you see that interested you?

Whom do you think you would like to talk with?

Was there anything you didn't understand?

Now, ask them to mill about again, this time asking questions or making comments or pointing out similarities or differences. After this activity, you might want to ask each student to choose a partner to sit down with and to find out a little more about that person.

3.

Strategy Type: One-Centered

Title: What Am I?

Prepare 20 three by five cards with the name of an animal or a thing written on each one. These items can range from easy ones like tree, cat, dog, elephant, and book to more complicated ones like glue, coca-cola, and matches. The teacher asks for a volunteer from the class to be the first participant. If you don't get a volunteer, pick one of the more aggressive students. The student is then asked to come to the front of the class and sit on a chair.

A. Instructions: Ask for a volunteer from the class. Have the student come forward and turn around with his/her back to the rest of the class. Now show the class one of the three by five cards with the name of an animal or thing written on it. Pin the card on the student's

back. The student now becomes that thing or animal, i.e., dog, cat, soap, etc. The volunteer student does not know what he is, but the class does. The only way for the volunteer student to find out what he is, is to ask the class questions. Class members give only the information asked for. Each volunteer is allowed to ask 10 questions of 10 different class members. After five questions, the student may ask one of the class members for a hint. If the student does not get the correct answer after 10 questions, the class may give him hints until he/she finds the answer. Make certain all class members understand the rules before the activity begins.

B. Instructions: For the shyer, less verbal student, turn the activity around. Let the spotlighted person know what the card says, but not the rest of the class. The class members must ask the questions to find out what is on the card, and the focus person only has to answer yes or no! This is, obviously, a very painless, low risk way to be the star of the show.

4.

Strategy Type: One-Centered

Title: In The Spotlight

Thought Gathering: Give each student a copy of a list of possible interview questions and allow them a few minutes of quiet reflection -- a chance to think about how they might answer the questions.

Sharing: Ask a volunteer to come up to the front of the class and sit comfortably in a chair. Allow group members to ask questions from the list or their own original questions to the volunteer. The one being interviewed has the right to say "I pass," on any question that s/he can't or doesn't want to answer. S/he also has the opportunity after eight minutes of interviewing to ask back to members of the group any question that was posed to him/her. Be sure that the group understands that there is a time limit, a right to pass, and an opportunity to ask the three questions back.

5.

Strategy Type: Unified Group

Title: Line Ups

You will ask your students to line up in the room according to a certain pattern (listed examples below). In order to form their lines, it will be necessary for them to speak with each other to determine their relative positions.

Use these ideas and invent your own!

1. Alphabetical order according to last names.
2. Alphabetical order according to native country name.
3. How long have you been in the United States?
4. How long have you studied English?
5. How many brothers and sisters do you have?
6. How many people do you know in this town that are from your native country?
7. What time did you get up this morning?
8. What time did you go to bed last night?
9. How old are you?
10. How tall are you?
11. How many different girlfriends/boyfriends have you had?
12. How long is your hair?
13. Who is wearing the brightest color clothing?
14. How much money do you have in your pocket right now?

6.

Strategy Type: Unified Group

Title: Strip Story

Find a short story or make up a story with a very simple plot. Divide the story into parts equal to the number of students in the class. Type each part on a separate piece of paper. Give each student a part of the story in random order. The task is for the class to put the story back together again. Students will have to understand what is contained in each part and will have to ask each other questions in order to discover where the part they have fits into the main plot of the story.

Instructions: You have just been given a slip of paper with a sentence on it. This sentence is part of a larger story. Each member of your group has one sentence from the story. You will now have 5 minutes to memorize the sentence on your paper. After you have memorized your sentence, give the paper to me.

Now give the students 20 minutes to put the story back together again from memory. After the students feel they have the correct order, have them tell the story to the rest of the class. Each individual in the group must remember his/her portion of the story in order for it to be successful.

7.

Strategy Type: Dyads

Title: Where Do I Put It?

The following 2 activities involve one student giving directions to his or her partner. A screen of some sort is set up between the two students who sit facing each other so that they can see each other's face and hear each other clearly but cannot see each other's paper or materials. (A manila file folder opened out and set on edge works fine for a screen or barrier.)

Activity #1

One student has a blank sheet which he or she folds into nine squares and then opens out to use as a game board. The partner has a dittoed sheet that has nine squares with a small simple illustration in each square. The illustrations might be something like a cup and saucer, a cat, a tennis racket, an old car, a woman's shoe, a garbage can, a flag, a brush, and a flower. The student with the illustrated sheet must tell his partner what to draw and where to draw it with as much detail as possible. He or she may not use his or her hands and may not show the drawings to the partner. When they are finished they should compare papers. You might have them then switch roles, using another prepared ditto with different illustrations.

8.

Strategy Type: Dyads

Title: Where Do I Put It? #2

Give all students a piece of paper and have them fold it

into nine squares and open it out to form a game board. Give both of the partners an identical set of nine picture cards. Tell the students they must place pictures on the game board in exactly the same positions, but they must not look at each other's board or pieces. Have one student decide to be the speaker, the other the listener. The speaker describes the pictures and tells the listener where to place them. When all the pieces are in place, have them compare and then switch roles.

9.

Activity Type: Small Group

Title: Pictures! Pictures! Pictures!

Divide students into two or three groups with no more than five to a group. Each group will receive 20 pictures to pass around and look at. These should be a variety of pictures from magazines and should be mounted on 8½ X 11" colored construction paper.

Instructions: Your group has just been given 20 pictures to pass around and look at. It will be the responsibility of your group to find things that these pictures have in common and place them in groups. Use your imagination and creativity. For example, let's say I have a picture of a bear, a cat, a dog, and an elephant. These pictures belong in the same group because they are all animals. This is something they all have in common. Appoint a secretary for the group. Have that individual write the number or letter of each picture which belongs in the group.

Make certain that each picture belongs in a group.

After each group has finished, ask them to come up to the front of the class and display their pictures by groups. The class must see if they can guess what the pictures have in common.

10.

Strategy Type: Small Group

Title: Word Search

Divide the class into groups of three to five. Write a polysyllabic English word on the board, i.e., encyclopedia or translation.

Instructions: I have just written the word _____ on the board. Your group will now have three minutes to make as many words as possible from the letters in this word. Possible words from Encyclopedia, for example, would be can, an, loan, and pedal. Words from Translation would be train, sit, rate, etc. (Write on board) Your group will receive a score equal to the number of correct words. Each group should have a secretary. Only the secretary can write words within the group. If you think of a word tell the group secretary and he/she will write it down. Your group may challenge any of the other groups or correct words. If you do not believe the word they have is correct, you say challenge. Look up the word in the dictionary. If you do not find the word, you get their point. If you find the word, they get the point. Make certain all class members understand the instructions before going on with the activity.

11.

Strategy Type: Large Group

Title: Grab Bag

Ask each student in the class to bring a small personal item to class. Tell them what they bring should be a secret. They should not let anyone else in the class know what they are bringing. It's a good idea to tell the students to bring items which are small and which will not break. Show them an average size grocery sack and tell them that all the items from the class must fit in the bag. After you have collected one item from every individual in the class, you are ready to start the activity. (Sometimes it takes several days to get one item from everyone so plan ahead!) Have a volunteer student come up to the front of the class and pick out an object and show it to the class. The class will offer suggestions as to whose object it is and why it seems to belong to him/her. After one or two minutes of discussion the student who drew the item should find out if the class was correct.

12.

Strategy Type: Large Group

Title: Idea Blizzard

Have your class as a whole brainstorm as many ideas as they can come up with of things to do in their new (American) hometown that are fun and entertaining and cost less than $4.00.

(This works better for older students.)

Accept all ideas, no matter how crazy. Ask a "secretary" to jot them down on the board. When a list has been made, ask various students whether they have ever done these things or if they would like to. See which activity interests which students. Suggest to your students that they make a Social Calendar for their class in order to organize outings together. Make a list of students' names and phone numbers. Find out who has a car and who doesn't, and who is over 21. (For dancing in clubs!) This is an excellent way to encourage your students to become socially active together and practice their new language out of the classroom.

In general, there are no hard and fast rules about the proper time to introduce new strategy types to your students. However, it seems to be a good idea to start with restructuring, unified group, and one-centered activities, as these three types begin to change your students' attitudes about what learning entails, about their own self-image, and about the importance of cooperation in forming a positive class experience. When your group has reached the stage of being able to function in dyads and small groups, there will be occasions when you will want to return to earlier strategies for a time, just to reinforce these early learnings. For example, you may notice a certain disruptive competitive spirit forming. You may want to remind your group of the advantages of cooperation through a unified group activity. Or you may have a student who seems to be demanding too much personal attention to the detriment of the group. Plan a One-Centered activity around him/her in order to provide that special needed attention. Do the same for a new student or one who seems to have withdrawn a little, to remind him/her of each individual's worth and importance to the group.

It has been our experience that students do benefit from conversation class activities, but free conversation can and must be structured. It requires careful sequencing of activities, careful preparation of the individuals involved, and careful movement of topics from non-personal to self-disclosure. With a gradual, methodical development of group interaction and a building of group spirit over time, in conjunction with the teacher's imagination, creativity, and concern, you have the magic formula for fail-proof conversation groups. We wish you success and satisfaction.